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WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

a CULTURAL COMMENTARY by BARBARA APSTEIN

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Thirty years ago, Edward Albee chose this whimsically mystifying title for what was to become one of the best-known plays of the 1960's. What was there to be afraid of? At that time, Woolf was known primarily as a modernist writer who pioneered the stream-of-consciousness technique. Her novels were densely written, poetic, and demanding of readers, although perhaps less "fearsome" than the work of such contemporaries as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Ezra Pound. Albee's play, despite its title, had nothing to do with Woolf or her writing, but with the bitter domestic warfare of a couple locked in a love-hate relationship, played memorably in the movie version by Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor.

Today Woolf's novels, especially To the Lighthouse and Mrs. Dalloway, are standard in any study of modernist literature, and discussions of her work flourish in academic journals. But a lively interest in Woolf also exists outside the universities, which is surprising for an author who assumes such a high degree of literary sophistication and attentiveness in her readers. Sales of books by and about her have grown steadily: more than two million copies of novels, biographies, memoirs, diaries and letters by Woolf and her circle of friends known as the Bloomsbury group are in print from her publisher, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. A highly praised film adaptation of her novel Orlando was recently released, and an opera based on Mrs. Dalloway was introduced in the fall of 1993 by the Lyric Opera of Cleveland. Woolf has even entered popular culture: in an ad for Barnes and Noble bookstores, her portrait, in profile, faces that of a smiling Stephen King. Devotees may purchase Virginia Woolf pillows, tote bags and sweatshirts, as well as a "personal journal" with a photograph of a girlish Woolf on its cover ("with Virginia Woolf overseeing your efforts, how can you go wrong?"). Last year, a new women's rock group chose the name "Shakespeare's Sister."

That Virginia Woolf's name has become widely known is probably due less to her novels than to two lectures she delivered at the women's colleges of Cambridge University in October, 1928. The lectures didn't attract much attention at the time; according to some reports, Woolf spoke softly and was hard to hear. A year later, A Room of One's Own, the published text of the lectures, sold fairly well. Although steady sales continued, the book would not reach its huge potential audience for another forty years: A Room was full of provocative ideas whose time had not yet come.

During the decades that followed, Woolf's reputation as a novelist grew steadily, but her feminist writings, including A Room, received very little attention. Some critics even felt that her feminist ideas marred her "creative" work, making it too political. It wasn't until the late 1960's that a newly-revived feminist movement discovered A Room of One's Own. While the feminists of Woolf's generation had focused their attention on public issues — women's right to a university education, to financial independence, to enter the professions — by the late 60's these battles had been largely won. The new generation of feminists turned their attention to the arts, seeking to analyze the distinctive qualities of poems, plays and novels by women — and asking why, through the centuries, women had produced many fewer works of art than men. These were precisely the subjects Woolf had addressed in 1928. She had argued that women's writing is different from men's in fundamental ways and that "it is useless [for women] to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure." Because Woolf believed that "we think back through our mothers if we are women," she sought to identify a tradition of women writers. In the 1970's, A Room of One's Own became a basic introductory text in Women's Studies courses. The anthologies of literature by women which began to appear in print were guided by Woolf's analysis; in one of them, The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, A Room is acknowledged to be "the first major achievement of feminist criticism in the English Language." By 1991 A Room was so widely known that a one-woman stage performance, with Eileen Atkins playing Woolf, had a successful run in London, New York and Boston. The proliferation of "Of One's Own" titles attests to the widespread influence of the essay: one of the first academic studies of literature by women, A Literature of Their Own, was followed by A Stage Of Their Own (feminist playwrights of the Suffrage Era); A History of Their Own (European history from a woman's perspective); A Heritage of Their Own (women in U.S. history); A Mind of Her Own (a biography of German psychoanalyst Karen Horney); and A League Of Their Own, a movie about the women's baseball league formed during World War II when the male athletes had gone off to war. Last year, when a women's bathroom was installed outside the U. S. Senate chamber (the men's room had of course been there for years), the New York Times head-

lined the story, "A (Rest) Room of Their Own." The Boston Globe did even better: "Flush with Victory, Senate Women Win Another: A Room of Their Own."

What, fifty years after its original publication, continues to give this essay such widespread appeal? Woolf's thesis — "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" — is no longer controversial. Her tone is modest, even self-effacing; she had some trouble with the topic, Woolf confesses at the beginning of her essay, and is very much afraid that she will disappoint her readers. At first, A Room seems rambling, even aimless. Woolf sits on the bank of a river that flows through "Oxbridge" on a beautiful October day, she strolls through the university's courts and quadrangles, she has lunch. She recalls some fragments of poetry by Tennyson and Christina Rossetti, sees a cat without a tail, walks to "Fernham," a women's college, meets a friend for dinner. The following day, she goes to the British Museum to read what men have written about women, then browses through the shelves searching for books by women.

Yet the reader, accompanying Woolf in her wanderings, begins to sense that an argument is taking shape. Strolling around Oxbridge, lost in thought, Woolf inadvertently steps onto the grass:

"Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me... His face expressed horror and indignation...he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me."

Being shooed off the grass appears to be a trivial event and the overreacting Beadle a figure of fun. But this humorless enforcer of university rules returns in the guise of an ironic "guardian angel" who refuses Woolf admittance to the library ("ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction"), and he ultimately comes to represent all the ways in which men have discouraged and criticized women who wanted to use their minds.

Woolf's account of her two meals at "Oxbridge," luncheon at a men's college and dinner at a women's college, has the same surface casualness. The men's college serves an elegant meal, delectably described in mouth-watering detail: "soles, sunk in a deep dish, over which the college cook had spread a counterpane of the whitest cream," followed by partridges "with all their retinue of sauces and salads" accompanied by unlimited quantities of fine wine. Dinner at Fernham, the women's college, is a

much sparser affair: plain gravy soup, unadorned beef, prunes and custard. With the biscuits and cheese, water is served. Why, Woolf wonders, did the men drink wine and women water? Why are men's colleges so wealthy and women's so poor? Woolf's argument gathers energy as she begins to understand why, for hundreds of years, men have gone to universities and women have stayed at home.

Thinking about the conditions of women's lives leads Woolf to the imagined biography of Judith Shakespeare, a character as powerful and memorable as many of those in her novels. If a woman had been born with the genius of Shakespeare — what would her fate have been? Growing up in sixteenth century England, she would have been denied access to education, discouraged from writing, probably forced by her parents into marriage at an early age. Woolf imagines Judith, driven by her extraordinary gift for language and love of the theater, running away to London. But she is unable to find work in the theater or any creative outlet for her genius, and finally, faced with an unwanted pregnancy, she commits suicide. Reflecting on Judith Shakespeare's tragic story, Woolf develops a provocative theory about the fate of creative women:

"When... one reads of a witch being dunked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Bronte who dashed her brains out on the moor ...Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman."

Women's silences, the novels and plays and poems which, because of social and political constrictions, women could not write, are as much a part of Woolf's analysis as the books they did write. An essay which began as a modest and seemingly casual series of reflections on the subject of women and fiction has emerged as an intellectual journey whose power and daring would not be widely appreciated for another four decades.

Woolf would probably be as surprised as anyone at the success of A Room of One's Own. She saw it as a small and relatively insignificant part of her life's work (in her diary for October 1929, she referred to it as "a trifle"). Yet she was not displeased with it. Looking back ten years later, in 1938, she recorded in her diary that "on rereading, [A Room] seems to me a little egotistic, flaunting, sketchy: but has its brilliance."